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ABSTRACT

A family-centered approach to improving the academic success of immigrant children is discussed and advocated, and illustrated with anecdotal statements of educators and parents. An educational agenda emphasizing parent involvement, support of literacy and other educational activities, intergenerational communication, and family strength and interdependence is proposed. It is argued that an agenda focusing on the family necessitates a shift in focus for research, parents' experiences with the schools, and classroom practice. Research for a family literacy agenda would explore issues of survival, communication, and power among refugees and immigrants. The different family members' experiences with the schools and schooling would be documented more fully. This knowledge could then inform practice for supporting the educational achievement of children without undermining the family as a crucial resource for making sense of a new life in a new setting. The next logical step would be using this knowledge to strengthen families and communities as resources for their members. The consequences of educational practice would be measured not only by achievement test scores, but also by the success of families and communities as sources of cooperative problem-solving, mutual support for learning, and respect for the resources of the generations. A 20-item bibliography is included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Literacy and second language learners: A family agenda

Gail Weinstein-Shr

Introduction

Imagine this scenario. There is a people's revolution. Academics are all forced to leave the U.S. with our families. Somehow, we end up in Laos. Glad for our lives, we take what we can get. The only work available is in the lowland rice farms. Our academic training has not prepared us well. Because of flabby upper arms and inexperience, we plant slowly and get very low wages. We can only hope that things will get better when we learn some Lao, so we can get better jobs.

I imagine my daughter Hannah going to school. Of course, Lao is the language of instruction. There are times when she doesn't understand the school assignment. Neither do I. After long outdoor days, I am lucky to have a slot in overcrowded adult classes for LLP (Limited Lao Proficient) adults, where I learn the essential vocabulary of farm implements. Hannah hangs out with some Lao kids. She wants to fit in. Soon she talks to me in Lao. She teases that she doesn't understand English anymore.

What would I want for Hannah, for my husband and for me in this new life? How could my adult classes and Hannah's school classes contribute to making that new life? What would any of us want? This paper is an attempt to explore that question.

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I. Defining the problem: A school perspective

Experience

> I feel so bad for these kids. The parents don't come to parent-teacher conferences. I've never seen any at open house either. I don't think they really try to help the kids with school. I wonder, maybe in their culture, education isn't as important. (Secondary school teacher in refugee concerns discussion group, TESOL 1989)

The teacher quoted above does not know very much about the families or the communities of the children in her classroom. She only knows that they are poor. She does not have the time, she feels, or the adequate means to find out more.

> I visit them (the Cambodians) in their homes. I explain why it's important for them to come. I even call them the night before to remind them. 'Yes', they say. 'I'm coming'. Then, next morning, I wait, no one comes. So I call them.
>
> (U. Thiem, personal communication)

Thiem knows quite a bit about the families of the children she teachers. She is a native speaker of Khmer. Her commitment to helping Cambodian children succeed is reflected in the long hours she puts in, and her persistent (though often fruitless) efforts to convince parents to come to the school for parent events. Teachers and administrators are frustrated. The solution, it seems, is to help these parents to get involved, and to provide them with the skills they need to do the kinds of things that the parents of successful school achievers do.

Research

The evidence is convincing. Educational research from several domains indicates the importance of parents in the school achievement of their children. Scholars of "emergent literacy" point to evidence that conceptual development happens during the earliest years in life (Teale and Suzlby, 1986), leading to emphasis on parents as the "first teacher". Children's achievement in school has been demonstrated to be directly correlated with mother's level of education (Sticht, 1988). In addition, it is clear that parent behaviors, such as ways of "scaffolding" or constructing conversations, ways of talking about pictures in books, ways of telling bedtime stories and other ways of interacting around print are important factors in predicting children's school achievement (Heath, 1982).

The impact of parents and home environment has also been a recent focus of scholars interested in language minority children. Attempts to understand school achievement have focused on early literacy and language at home (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1984) and on other school-home differences (e.g. Cummins, 1981, Moll and Diaz 1987). Results of these studies have been aimed at helping educators understand differences in order to sensitize teachers and to facilitate academic learning.

Practice

"Family literacy" is the response in practice for working with parents to improve the school achievement of children.

Among the new intitiatives include the Barabara Bush Family Literacy Foundation; the Even Start Legislation, and the Family English Literacy Program of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, which funds family literacy programs around the country.

One set of goals for family and intergenerational programming has been improving the school achievement of children by promoting parental involvement. Programs aimed primarily at increasing parental involvement are constituted by activities that encourage or teach parents: 1) to provide a home environment that supports children's learning needs; 2) to volunteer in the schools as aides or other roles; 3) to monitor children's progress and communicate with school personnel; and 4) to tutor children at home to reinforce work done in school (Simich-Dudgeon 1986).

A second set of goals often found in family literacy programs is "... to improve skills, attitudes, values and behaviors linked to reading" (Nickse 1990, p.5). Models that aim at these goals are often constituted by a variety of reading activities. Some of these may involve teaching parents to imitate behaviors that occur in the homes of "successful" readers such as reading aloud to children and asking them specific types of questions as they read. Parents of young children may practice in adult groups on books that they may then read to their children. This approach is possible for parents of very

young children who have some hope of learning enough English to be able to keep linguistically one step ahead of their children.

II. The social context of literacy: literacy and everyday lives

Over the last five years, I have had the opportunity to learn about the lives and the concerns of refugees and immigrants in Philadelphia through Project LEIF, Learning English through Intergenerational Friendship[1] and more recently in Western Massachusetts. The concerns of adults I have spoken with revolve around three themes: survival, communication, and power.

Survival

> Soldiers come we run always run. I have my baby inside. I run. Baby come out I can't rest. My family we hear guns. I run with baby. When we not run baby dead. Five my children die from Khmer Rouge in my country (as told to P. Lopatin, 1990).

The stories of the Hmong, Khmer and Vietnamese that I know reveal a common characteristic: these people are survivors. The families we have worked with made it here despite unbelieveable

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[1] Project LEIF, Learning English through Intergenerational Friendship, is a model program developed at Temple University Institute on Aging's Center for Intergenerational Learning. Through Project LEIF, over 500 college-age volunteers have been trained to tutor English as a Seconed Language (ESL) to elder refugees and immigrants at four community centers throughout the city. These include a Cambodian Buddhist temple, a Chinese community center, a Latino Senior Center and a multicultural neighborhood center. For information about Project LEIF, see Weinstein-Shr, 1989.

odds, and they continue to use their survival resources to manage in difficult conditions with limited resources. The families we know have been ingenious in their strategies for dealing with problems.

Families divide the language and literacy labor. In one Cambodian home, the kids read the English mail, the mother reads Khmer letters aloud to the family, and the eldest daughter, who was able to get her license, has become the family driver. In several homes, every phone call is answered by two people- an adult native language speaker and a younger English speaker. The superfluous interlocutor then hangs up.

Adults without a history of literacy or of schooling have come up with some very creative strategies for supporting their children's education. Poor Khmer farmers in Cambodia often sacrificed their most valued resource by selling a parcel of their own farmland to send one child to school (Samien Nol, personal communication). Likewise, in Philadelphia, many adults miss their own language classes to earn money from seasonal blueberry picking, but rarely pull their children from school for the same purposes (Atzert, personal communication). One Hmong family has separate hooks on the walls for their children's book bags, a study table in the common room which automatically gets priority for use for homework. The father attends clan meetings in Nebraska to discuss, among other things, strategies for supporting children's school success. One decision, for example, was for clan elders (most of whom are not themselves literate) in

cities across the country to throw a party in which all children of the clan were given a quarter for every A received (Weinstein-Shr, in press).

Our experience at Project LEIF confirms the research of others that refugees are excellent problem-solvers. Like the native-speakers of English that we learn about from Fingeret (1984), many refugees who have limited experience with print rely on social networks and their own wits to solve a wide variety of problems. When older adults were asked why they wanted to learn English, they rarely brought up survival concerns (Weinstein-Shr and Lewis 1991). Rather, most reported that they wanted to learn English to be able to communicate with children or grandchildren. The second theme, then, is communication.

Communication

> Cambodia was more fun. I had friends there, and they all spoke Khmer. We'd all talk about things, then we'd go get something to eat. (S. Yi to A. Atzert, 1990)

This is the response of an elder Cambodian woman as translated by her grandson. She had just been asked what the difference was between Philadelphia's open air market and the market where she shopped in Cambodia. Atzert confesses that this was the first time he actually pictured his language-learning partner as the talkative, bubbly, competent and sociable person that he now imagined from her answer.

For uprooted adults, there are important consequences of changes in the "communicative economy" (Hymes, 1984) when they enter a setting in which new codes (i.e. languages) as well as new channels (i.e. writing) are used. One Puerto Rican woman reports that she feels like an outsider in her own children's homes when her grandchildren speak English. A Hmong woman speaks of her fear that her grandchildren will not know what life was like in Laos, and that as their linguistic repertoire changes, she will have no way to tell them.

For parents of school age children, the change in the communicative economy means that they often have to rely on children to decipher communications from schcol. One Cambodian man tearfully reported that his son had been expelled six months earlier. The boy left every morning at eight, returning at 4, so the man did not know about the expulsion until six months later when a neighbor told him. He had, until then, depended on the boy to decipher messages from school. This raises the third theme which repeatedly arises in the tales of our neighbors- the theme of power.

Power

I have ears but I am deaf! I have a tongue but I am mute!"

-Chinese elder on life in his English-speaking neighborhood.

What happens when children are the translators, the decoders, the messengers? One tutor noted in his log that he wondered who was in charge when he came to tutor his older Khmer partner, and

found heavy metal posters displayed in every room in the house. One Lao boy sabotages his mother's efforts to learn English, disrupting her English lessons, and repeatedly tells her that she is too stupid and too old to learn. One tutor reports that when she calls her Vietnamese partner on the phone, the woman's son "hovers" on the line, as if English has become his domain to supervise and control. When this woman can't solve a problem, she lets it go unsolved rather than asking her children.

The issues of power have an important impact on issues of schooling. Several parents report their frustration that they are unable to help with homework. Many Asian parents we work with report their fear of looking stupid to their children. Even when kids are willing to be helpful, parents report their shame in having to depend on them.

The discomfort caused by power shifts in communication is as uncomfortable for children as it is for adults. When I asked Asian teens for advice to teachers, one response was particularly poignant- "please, if I translate for you when you talk to my mother, don't look at me, look at her when you speak." (at Penn TESOL 1989). This Chinese youth told us of his embarrassment when his own mother was marginalized, and when he was treated like an authority in front of her.

These examples show that literacy events (Heath 1983) and speech events (Hymes 1974) can be structured in ways to ascribe roles that are empowered or powerless for the interlocutors. The

consequences of shifts in power positions have consequences for all who are involved in the shift.

III. Redefining the problem: A family perspective

If I were to find myself in Laos, I would certainly want my daughter Hannah to succeed in school. Her achievement would be one source of our concern, and hopefully, of our pride. However, that is not all that I would want. I would want her to see me as a competent and loving parent. Despite my limited Lao proficiency, I would want her to see me as a person with authority, and with the wisdom of life experience. The way that she were taught in school could have a great impact on the degree to which this would be the case. Would teachers and resettlement workers tell Hannah to learn Lao as quickly as possible, and ask us to stop using English in the home because it would be bad for her? Would Hannah have to tell her teacher with shame that she hadn't done her homework because we were unable (i.e. too ignorant or stupid) to help her? Would Hannah learn only Lao history, concluding indirectly that our past life in America had nothing to do with her and was thus of no use or consequence? If the goal were only to make Hannah into a successful student, to what degree could the mission succeed under these conditions? If it did, what would the price be for us and for Hannah?

I propose an educational agenda in which family strength and joyful interdependence is the goal, and where <u>schooling</u> is a variable with profound consequences for the prospects of

realizing that goal. With a family agenda, the issues and questions shift.

Research

Educational research for a family agenda would explore issues of survival, communication and power such as those in the three sets of questions posed below:

1. How do refugees, immigrants (or any families served by schools) solve or fail to solve problems that require literacy skills? (This requires seeking to discover existing resources in addition to those that are lacking)

2) What are the functions and uses of literacy (both native and second language) in the lives of people that are served? Who uses what language to whom and under what circumstances? What are the consequences of this particular communicative economy? What is the implication for home-school communications (including the parents' experience of those communications)

3. What is the significance of language in the negotiation of new roles and relationships in a new setting? How has authority and power shifted in families? What is the role of language in intergenerational relationships? What are the ways in which schools influence the process in which these relationships are negotiated?

Experience

With a family agenda, teachers and administrators will continue to share their perspectives. However, channels will also be created for documenting the experiences of mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers and children themselves about their lives in school and at home with one another.

Research like that of Twymong (1990)) shows the price that parents can sometimes pay for taking on behaviors in the home to help their children do well in school. This research showed that when parent-child interaction became centered around school-like tasks such as the re-enactment of reading lessons, the children initially did well in school. However, over time, children began to experience tension, anger, hostility, resistance and alienation in their relationships at home (Willett and Bloome, in press). Delgado-Gaitan (1987) provides another example as she documents the hopes and frustrations of Mexican parents who desparately want something better for their children. She demonstrates the ways in which these adults provide supports within the limits of their resources in a system that does not tap into their potential for more substantial involvement.

The hopes and the frustrations of teachers and administrators is one part of the tale that needs to be told. However, parents' experiences with their childrens' schools and schooling, the experiences of elders as unique and irreplaceable

sources of cultural transmission, and the experiences of children who make sense of the world through lived experiences at school and at home also need to be part of the story on the record that shapes research, decision-making and policy.

Practice

Research and experience of children and adults in families can inform practice that aims at supporting the educational achievement of children without undermining the family as a crucial resource for making sense of a new life in a new setting. The Foxfire experiment provided a strong sense of the possibilities for enabling children to strengthen their literacy skills while documenting and valuing the collective knowledge and experience of their families and communities (Wigginton, 1985). In this project, children from the hills of Appalachia collected recipes, folk tales, instructions for making banjos, etc. by interviewing elders and creating documents that would preserve this information for their future children and their children's children. Innovative educators are beginning to rediscover the power of acknowledging these resources. Navajo parents who are unable to read in any language are often wonderful story tellers who can captivate their children with tales, and who can listen to their children tell or read stories. Latino adults in the Pajaro Valley have become more interested in learning to read and in sharing literacy experiences with their children because of an

emphasis on Spanish literature in addition to English (Ada, 1988).

When schools can capitalize on these resources, literacy skills are developed and relationships are nurtured in synergy. As emphasis is placed on what can be done and what can be shared rather than on what isn't done or what isn't shared, children and adults can develop ways of being together in which they both stretch, learn and profit from one another. One experiment showed that children who read to their parents improved their reading skills as much as a control group who received equal hours of academic tutoring in reading (Tizard, Schofield and Hewison, 1982). If I were in Laos, I imagine feeling pretty foolish trying to struggle through a Lao story, with Hannah looking on in contempt. But I can imagine listening with pleasure as Hannah read proudly to me!

While steps have been taken to use insight into the family for improving school achievement, the next logical step is to use knowledge of schooling and learning processes to strengthen families and communities as resources for their members. With a family perspective, the consequences of educational practice will be measured not only by achievement test scores, but also by measures of success for families and communities as sources of cooperative problem-solving, mutual support for learning, respect for the resources of the generations. With the challenges that our children will face for solving global problems, team work and cooperation between the generations is our best hope.

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